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HIGH CASTE INDIAN MAGIC.

BY PROF. H. KELLAR.

FIFTEEN years spent in India and the far East have convinced me that the high caste fakirs, or magicians, of Northern India have probably discovered natural laws of which we in the West are ignorant. That they succeed in overcoming forces of nature which to us seem insurmountable, my observation satisfies me beyond doubt.

No topic of the marvellous has excited more general interest and remained in greater obscurity than Hindoo jugglery. Discussion has, through a confusion of terms, lent to the subject a vagueness which it might otherwise have escaped. Magic is defined as "the art of putting in action the power of spirits, or the occult powers of nature"; so it seems proper to use the term magician, in speaking of the esoteric marvel worker, in the sense of a human being who is able to put in action "the occult powers of nature."

News of the strange performances of the Hindoo magicians has reached the West for centuries. Marco Polo's stories of their feats, though at first received in Europe with some credence, afterwards served to foster the impression that he was the willing victim of delusion. The tales of the Crusaders rivalled those told of the achievements of the great Merlin, and we glean from the exploits of Thomas of Ercildoune and the wizards of the North glimpses of what may be the reflected potency of the Tibetan esoterics. Yet, through a thousand years of rumor, the high caste fakir has succeeded in preserving the secret of his powers, which have on more than one occasion baffled my deepest scrutiny, and remained the inexplicable subject of my lasting wonder and admiration.

When I appeared before Queen Victoria, at Balmoral, in 1878, I was asked if I could rival the feats of levitation which Her Majesty's officers in Northern India had observed and described in their letters home. My reply was that with proper mechanical appliances I could produce an illusion of levitation and appear to overcome, as the jugglers did, the force of gravity, but that the actual feat of suspending the operation of that force was beyond my powers. As an evidence of the world-wide curiosity manifested in these truly wonderful phenomena, I may mention the fact that the King of Burmah, before whom I appeared at Mandalay, and the venerable Dom Pedro, in the Teatro Dom Pedro Secundo at Rio, made similar requests, to which I was compelled to return the same reply. The Sultan of Zanzibar described to me and asked me to duplicate the feat of the witch doctors of the east coast of Africa and of Borneo, who, he believed, projected their astral bodies at will, with the curious additional power of imparting to the astral image an aspect so hideous and terrifying that its appearance to human eyes could actually destroy life itself.

The jugglers of India may be divided into two classes. The low caste fakirs are met with all over the East, traveling in parties of from three to six. They are arrayed in breech clouts and have an air of pitiable poverty and misery. Each party generally includes one or two women, whose flowing robes assist in the concealment of the necessary juggling apparatus. At none of their *séances*, that I have ever seen or heard of, did the audience completely surround the performers, opportunity being thus offered for evasions and changes.

They all seem to have the same stock in trade, and to be willing to explain any one of their tricks in private for two or three rupees. They are to be met with almost anywhere in Indian cities—in the plazas, open squares, around the bases of the public statues and in the courtyards of the hotels. They content themselves with the sword and basket trick, the duck trick, the mango trick, the pineapple trick, and the manipulation of cobras. All of these, of which I shall speak presently, are readily understood by the practised eye.

The high caste fakirs, on the contrary, are only seen at great public fêtes, such as the coronation of a Prince, the festival of a Maharajah, the coming of age of a Nizam, the grand feast of the

Mohorrum, and such special occasions as the visit of the Prince of Wales to India. I have had the good fortune to be present on all these occasions, and confess that after thirty years' professional experience as a magician, in the course of which I have circumnavigated the globe a baker's dozen of times, and penetrated the remotest corners of the East and West alike, I am still unable to arrive at a satisfactory explanation of the performances I witnessed.

These fakirs—for that term does not imply a reflection upon their personalities or their methods—are very dignified men, of patriarchal appearance, with ascetic faces and long gray beards. All the skilful ones I have seen were quite advanced in years, and were said to have spent their lives in study and in seclusion. It seems plausible indeed to believe their story, that it is only after a life-time of contemplation and study that they are admitted into the higher circles of the esoteric brotherhood, whose seat is in the monasteries of Tibet and in the mountain recesses of northern Hindustan. They are quiet, suave and secretive, and appear to attach an almost religious significance to the manifestations of their power. There is nothing inherently improbable in the theory that they are initiated into a knowledge whose secrets have been successfully preserved for centuries.

That there is anything supernatural in their power I would be the last to concede, for I have spent my life in combating the delusions of supernaturalism and the so-called manifestations of spiritualism.

The most marvellous phenomena which I have observed may be described under the heads of feats of levitation, or the annihilation of gravity; feats of whirling illusion, in which one human form seems to multiply itself into many, which again resolve themselves into one; and feats of voluntary interment.

My first experience with the phenomenon of levitation was in January, 1882, during the course of an engagement I was filling at the Chowringhee Theatre Royal in Calcutta. Mr. Eglinton, a professed spiritual medium, was giving *séances* in Calcutta at the time, and as I openly avowed my ability to expose the frauds of all so-called mediums, I was taken to one of them which occurred in a brilliantly lighted apartment. I will not describe it otherwise than to say that it so puzzled and interested me that I gladly accepted the invitation an evening or two afterwards to

be present with several others at a dark *séance* given by Mr. Eglinton.

It was now that the feat of levitation was apparently performed in the presence of these spectators. The only furniture in the room was a plain teakwood table, a zither, some chairs, two musical boxes and a scroll of paper. A circle having been formed, I was placed on Mr. Eglinton's left and seized his left hand firmly in my right. Immediately on the extinction of the lights, I felt him rise slowly in the air and as I retained firm hold of his hand, I was pulled to my feet, and subsequently compelled to jump on a chair and then on the table in order to retain my hold of him. That his body did ascend into the air on that occasion with an apparently utter disregard of the law of gravity, there can be no doubt. The musical-boxes, playing briskly, then appeared to float through the air above our heads, small green lights appearing and disappearing here and there without visible cause, and the zither playing near the ceiling or immediately over our heads.

I mention this incident as a preface to the more remarkable feats of levitation I will now describe, and also to say that this being my first experience of that strange power, what most excited my wonder was the fact, for I may speak of it as a fact without qualification, that when Mr. Eglinton rose from my side, and, by the hold he had on my right hand, pulled me up after him, my own body appeared for the time being to have been rendered non-susceptible to gravity.

On the occasion of the visit of the Prince of Wales to Calcutta during the winter of 1875-6, I saw a marvel of levitation performed in the presence of the Prince and of some fifty thousand spectators. The place was the Maidam, or Great Plaza of Calcutta, and the old fakir who was the master magician of the occasion did his work out in the open plaza. Around him, in raised seats and on and under the galleries of the neighboring houses, the native Princes and Begums were gathered by the score, arrayed in their silks and jewels, with a magnificence to which our Western eyes are little accustomed.

After a *salaam* to the Prince, the old fakir took three swords with straight cross-barred hilts, and buried them hilt downwards about six inches in the ground. The points of these swords were very sharp, as I afterwards informed myself. A younger

fakir, whose black beard was parted in what we now call the English fashion, although it originated in Hindustan, then appeared and, at a gesture from his master, stretched himself out upon the ground at full length, with his feet together and his hands close to his sides, and, after a pass or two made by the hands of the old man, appeared to become rigid and lifeless. A third fakir now came forward and taking hold of the feet of his prostrate companion, whose head was lifted by the master, the two laid the stiffened body upon the points of the swords, which appeared to support it without penetrating the flesh. The point of one of the swords was immediately under the nape of the man's neck, that of the second rested midway between his shoulders, and that of the third was at the base of his spine; there being nothing under his legs. After the body had been placed on the sword-points the second fakir retired, and the old man, who was standing some distance from it, turned and *salaamed* to the audience.

The body tipped neither to the right nor to the left, but seemed to be balanced with mathematical accuracy. Presently the master took a dagger with which he removed the soil round the hilt of the first sword, and, releasing it from the earth, after some exertion, quietly stuck it into his girdle, the body meanwhile retaining its position. The second and the third swords were likewise taken from under the body, which, there in broad daylight and under the eyes of all the spectators, preserved its horizontal position, without visible support, about two feet from the ground. A murmur of admiration pervaded the vast throng, and with a low *salaam* to the Prince, the master summoned his assistant, and lifting the suspended body from its airy perch they laid it gently upon the ground. With a few passes of the master's hand the inanimate youth was himself again.

Before describing the third and still more marvellous feat of levitation which it has been my privilege to see, I will say that by the use of metal shields, it is perfectly conceivable that the aged fakir could have laid the rigid body of his subject upon the sword points and kept it there without the assistance of anything marvellous. In a closed room with walls and ceilings to which the mechanical appliances of the magician's craft, as we understand it, could be attached, the feat of levitation, as described, could be performed. But this would be, of course, simply an illusion.

During the Zulu war I was in South Africa, travelling north

through Zululand. In Dunn's reservation, two hundred miles north from Durban, in Natal, I saw a witch doctor levitate the form of a young Zulu by waving a tuft of grass about his head, amid surroundings calculated to impress themselves deeply upon the most prosaic imagination. It was evening, and the witch doctor, who belonged to the class described more than once by Rider Haggard with great accuracy, was as revolting in his appearance as the high caste fakirs had been pleasing. A number of fakirs had gathered about our camp fire and I had given them some illustrations of my own skill. They seemed puzzled but were not specially curious. One of them stole away and after some minutes returned with their own conjuror, the witch doctor in question. After considerable solicitation from the natives, the intricacies of which my knowledge of the Zulu language did not enable me quite to penetrate, the conjuror, who at first seemed reluctant to give his consent to an exhibition of his powers before me, took a knob kerry or club and fastened it at the end of a thong of rawhide about two feet long. A young native, tall and athletic, whose eyes appeared to be fixed upon those of the conjuror with an apprehensive steadfastness, took his own knob kerry and fastened it at the end of a similar thong of hide. The two then stood about six feet apart in the full glare of the fire, and began, all the while in silence, to whirl their knob kerrys about their heads. I noticed that when the two clubs seemed, in their swift flight, almost to come in contact, a spark or flame passed or appeared to pass from one of them to the other. The third time this happened there was an explosion, the spark appeared to burst, the young man's knob kerry was shattered to pieces, and he fell to the ground apparently lifeless.

The witch doctor turned to the high grass a few feet behind us and gathered a handful of stalks about three feet long. Standing in the shadow and away from the fire, he waved, with a swift motion exactly similar to that of the clubs a few minutes before, the bunch of grass around the head of the young Zulu, who lay as dead, in the firelight. In a moment or two the grass seemed to ignite in its flight, although the witch doctor was not standing within twenty feet of the fire, and burned slowly, crackling audibly. Approaching more closely the form of the native in the trance the conjuror waved the flaming grass gently over his figure, about a foot from the flesh. To my intense amazement the re-

cumbent body slowly rose from the ground and floated upward in the air to a height of about three feet, remaining in suspension and moving up and down, according as the passes of the burning grass were slower or faster. As the grass burned out and dropped to the ground the body returned to its position on the ground, and after a few passes from the hands of the witch doctor, the young Zulu leaped to his feet, apparently none the worse for his wonderful experience.

The witch doctors of Africa have a great reputation for making rain and bewitching cows, and frequently seem to make themselves the vehicle of domestic enchantments and household spells, but, taking it altogether, the exhibition I have just described, was, I think, the most remarkable that has come under my vision.

I have heard in India that the fakirs walk in the air, but I have never met an eye-witness of this feat ; the accounts given me came second or third hand, and related that the magician laid himself flat upon the earth, face downwards, for a minute or a minute and a half, then arose, and, pressing his arms tightly against his sides, stepped forwards and upwards as if upon an aerial stairway, walking up into the air to an altitude of several hundred feet. My informant said that it was thought this might be done through an occult knowledge of electrical currents, as if these fakirs changed at will the nature of the electrical current with which their body was charged from the negative to the positive, or *vice versa*, inhaling an electrical influence from the earth which had the effect of destroying the force of gravity. But this seemed to me, as it still seems, unintelligible.

After the Eglinton *séance* in Calcutta, I saw a performance by the whirling fakirs in the Chandee Choke, the Cheapside of Calcutta. There were a score of Englishmen in the party which had gathered by arrangement, and we were escorted to a long empty room in the Chandee Choke, which was apparently an unoccupied store room. There was no back door, and the only two windows in the room—which were at either side of the entrance—looked on the street. There was no one present when we arrived, and we examined the room carefully, testing the walls, ceiling and floor for secret doors, traps, wires, etc., and came to the conclusion that in those respects, at least, all was as it should be. We then drew a chalk line one-third of the way down the room from the door, beyond which we were to remain as audience,

while four fakirs, who appeared at that moment from the street, were to give us an exhibition of their magical powers in the other two-thirds of the apartment, which was destitute of either doors or windows, and, so far as we could inform ourselves, absolutely without means of communication with the adjoining buildings or with the open air.

The old fakir took a chafing-dish and set it about ten feet from the chalk line on his side, casting upon its glowing coals a white powder, which gave out a strong scent of tuberose, very agreeable to the senses. A fine, white vapor arose from the burning powder and filled the corners of the ceiling, draping the dull panelling with a flying wreath or two, but still permitting a clear view of the end wall. At a point some six or eight feet beyond the chafing dish the old man and his three assistants began dancing slowly; they gave utterance to no sound but whirled faster and faster, with a rhythmic motion, their robes flowing out on either side and blending the four forms into a composite group, of which the tall master was the central figure. Suddenly, to our great astonishment, we became aware that there was only one form visible, that of the old man. The swift whirl of his dance was gradually relaxed, and in a minute or two he became motionless, *salaamed*, advanced in front of the chafing-dish, bowed again, and pointed with a dignified gesture to the rear of the apartment. We all looked eagerly in the direction of his gesture; there was not a living creature, nor indeed an object of any kind visible beyond the line except himself. With another *salaam* he returned to his original position in the rear of the chafing-dish, and began with reverse motion the dance of a moment before. Holding out his arms on each side of him as if the better to balance himself, he now sang in a low, monotonous tone, a chant, the words of which impressed themselves upon my memory and sounded like this :

“ *Ai ya or ekto do !* ”

In some inexplicable way the monotonous drone of this chant, which fell not unmusically from his lips, seemed to join with the vapors which curled about the scene to bewitch our fancies, or at all events to produce a condition of dreamy delight. If this was hypnotism, so be it; but whether or not the existence of this charmed condition can be ascribed to hypnotic influences, I never felt my senses more completely at my command; and with

my eyes fixed intently on his whirling figure I became aware that he seemed to be throwing from himself portions of his body ; one arm here, the other there, a leg here, and so on, the illusion being perfect, if illusion it was, and the end of the room where he had begun to dance alone becoming gradually filled with figures like his own, only younger, each whirling with the same chant in the same direction. Suddenly the dance again died away, the chant was hushed, and when we looked again there was but one performer visible, the old fakir, who advanced in front of the chafing-dish and asked for *backsheesh*. He received it liberally, and we again made an examination of the room but could discover no explanation of the disappearance of his companions.

Two years ago, in England, I saw the Walker illusion in Dean Street, London, and for the first time it seemed to me that I understood how the whirling illusion could be performed. After a careful study of the Walker illusion, I concluded that I could duplicate it in an act of my own upon the stage, and this I have done, I think, in what I call "The Blue Room, or the House and the Brain," which is based, of course, upon Bulwer's famous story of "The Haunters and the Haunted," which is, I believe, by common consent, the best ghost story in existence.

Colonel, afterwards Gen. Julius Medley, one time commander of the British forces at Lahore, related to me the most remarkable instance of voluntary interment which had come to his knowledge during his service in the East. I had told him of an experience of my own at Secunderabad in 1878, which I shall presently describe. He assured me of the accuracy of his account of the following incident, and as he was a most distinguished soldier and the uncle of my wife, I attach as much importance to his narrative as if I had myself seen what he related.

He said a group of fakirs of the high caste had visited his quarters in the preceding year and offered to give an exhibition. The old man had, without assistance, thrown himself into a trance while in a sitting position upon the ground. His three assistants had then taken hold of the end of his tongue and pushed it back until it closed the epiglottis. They then laid him upon his back, and swathed his body in bandages. The assistant fakirs next filled the eyes, ears, mouth, and nostrils of their apparently unconscious master with a red paste, not unlike putty, and ban-

daged his neck and face. All this took place in the presence of Colonel Medley and his staff. The entire body of the old man was then apparently protected from the atmosphere, as well as from the ants, which in the East attack every living thing that is helpless. It was for this purpose of protection, I learned, that the red paste had been put in the cavities of the face and head. The Colonel and his staff inspected the body of the old man and signified their willingness that the ceremony should proceed. In the meanwhile four of Colonel Medley's soldiers had dug a grave ten feet deep in the enclosed yard of the barracks, and at a gesture from the Colonel the old fakir's assistants lifted his body, and gently placed it in a box sheathed with metal, which was then hermetically sealed under the Colonel's eye. The box was lowered into the tomb, the earth was filled in, the surface was levelled, and millet seed was sown over the grave. The assistants then departed under a solemn promise to return in forty days.

Colonel Medley assured me that for every moment, day and night, of the forty succeeding days he had kept an armed guard on watch above the fakir's grave. He felt morally certain that no human agency could tamper with the tomb or the box without his knowledge. At the end of the specified time the fakirs returned and in the presence of Colonel Medley and his staff the tomb was opened. The body of the aged fakir was removed from the box, not differing in appearance in any way from the condition in which it was buried, except that the linen clothes in which it had been wrapped had rotted and fell away at the touch. The fakirs unwound the bandages, removed the red putty-like preparation from the orifices of the eyes, nose, mouth and ears, and with the assistance of a native woman washed the body in warm water and applied an unguent to the face. The woman blew her breath in the old man's mouth, passed her hand briskly over his limbs, and gave him a smart slap upon the chest. His tongue had in the meantime been put in a natural position and respiration seemed to begin with the blow of the woman's hand. The changes which passed over the features of the old man during the last stage of these preparations were awful to look upon. Misery and effort were painfully depicted upon them. But within five minutes after the breath seemed to reënter his body, the master fakir was himself again.

I was the guest of Colonel Jenkins, the commander of the British forces at that time. The incident of my own experience which I had related to Colonel Medley, and which drew from him the remarkable narrative I have just recounted, was this. I was one of a party of Englishmen present at a grand fête in Secunderabad at the palace of Sir Saler Jung, the Nizam of Secunderabad. An old man, with aquiline features, a long white beard and flashing black eyes, accompanied by his wife, a pretty little woman, came to us as the chief of a band of eight fakirs. In the presence of all the company, one of the young men was tightly bandaged, and a small glass disc was held in front of and directly between his eyes. His master told him to gaze fixedly at the disc, and, as he did so, the others of the band of fakirs began droning a chant, the words of which were :

“ Ram, ram, amaram, amaram, amaram,
Ram, ram, amaram, amaram, amaram.”

The bandaged fakir appeared to go to sleep under the drowsy hum of this incantation. He soon became to all appearance dead ; the blood seemed to leave the extremities, and his limbs stiffened. His tongue was now turned back until it filled the epiglottis ; a few passes were made over his face by the aged fakir, his eyes turned up until only the whites were visible, the lids were shut, and the red, putty-like substance I have alluded to was used to close his eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth.

Dr. Crawford, of the army, who was present, then made a careful examination of the man's condition. All the usual tests for death were applied, a mirror was held over his mouth, and to all intents and purposes he was pronounced dead. Dr. Crawford went even to the extent of what might be called cruelty, although the subject was undoubtedly unconscious, and stuck a large bodkin through the palm of the man's hands, through the tips of his ears, his cheeks, the ends of his fingers, his thighs, his arms, and other parts of his body. No blood came from these wounds, but a yellowish ichor followed the point of the needle. The master fakir took a coal of glowing charcoal and placed it on the upturned palm of his subject's hand, causing the flesh to sizzle and an unpleasant odor to arise, but there was no sign of feeling. This condition continued for thirty minutes, at the end of which the master fakir made passes over the body with his hands, removed the red paste from the face and

ears, took off the bandages, and bade us note the result. With horrible contortions and the appearance of great agony, which the old fakir assured us was only an appearance, his assistant returned to the land of the living, apparently as well as ever, except for a badly burned hand.

Bishop Thoburn, of the M. E. Church, in his book on the East, says he has repeatedly heard these stories of suspended animation and voluntary interment, and that Dr. John Martin Honiberger, formerly physician at the Court of Ranjit Singh, ruler of the Sikhs, had told him how a native of Cashmere named Hari Das had been buried alive in the presence of Ranjit Singh, but adds that Dr. Honiberger did not witness this interment himself, and that he can find no evidence in his own experience that such a thing ever takes place.

I am convinced, however, that such voluntary interments have taken place and there is abundant record of such incidents in the experiences of other Anglo-Indian officers besides General Medley. I not only "tell the tale as 'twas told to me," but I tell of what I have myself seen and which I am unable to explain.

HARRY KELLAR.